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Centers for Learning on Evaluation and Results
ANGLOPHONE AFRICA

POLICY BRIEF

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USING EVIDENCE IN POLICY AND PRACTICE

LESSONS FROM AFRICA

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SUMMARY & KEY MESSAGES

The COVID-19 pandemic emphasises the need to make informed choices, often with little time to prepare. How can we do this most effectively, and encourage use of the evidence which exists, or which we collect? This policy brief summarises the findings from research involving eight cases of policy or practice change, in five African countries and the West African region. This work sought to explicitly understand how the context and process facilitated or limited evidence use, building on cases that involved a variety of types of evidence – evaluations, research, research synthesis, citizen evidence and administrative data. The analytical framework used a behaviour change lens, to see what influenced the capability, the motivation and the opportunity to use evidence. We saw the following types of use: instrumental use (applying the recommendations); conceptual use (building understanding); process use (applying the learnings along the way); and symbolic use (reinforcing existing positions).

Key messages that emerged were:

- The analytical framework, which is based on behaviour change, is helpful in understanding and promoting use;
- Context matters in how evidence is used and it is important to understand the context prior to embarking on an evidence journey and in facilitating the journey;
- The demand for evidence needs to be cultivated, through formalising the use of evidence (e.g. in national evaluation plans), advocacy with senior policy makers and with civil society on the value and importance of evidence;
- Credibility, quality and legitimacy are critical at all stages in the evidence journey;
- Relationships matter a lot for effective evidence use;
- There are many ways in which evidence use takes place ranging from instrumental to conceptual to process to symbolic use. The implementing of findings or recommendations (instrumental use) is one type of use; other types of use are just as important;
- We have to be more purposeful about facilitating evidence processes if we wish to see use.

Background

With the advances in technology within Africa and across the world, there is an explosion of data. Evidence, as 'an argument or assertion back by information', (Cairney, 2016) comes from a plethora of sources – scientific research, evaluations, traditional/indigenous knowledge, administrative data and surveys of public opinion. Policy makers need to know how to recognise and access high-quality and robust evidence relevant to their needs. Accessing and using evidence takes place within, and is influenced by, a wider social and political context as well as the capabilities and cultures of individuals and institutions.

The quality of the evidence and how it is generated is only one part of evidence use. For evidence to support policy and practice, we need to get better at understanding the wider contextual influences, processes and mechanisms that enable or hinder its use.

The research

The research highlighted in this policy brief was carried out with, and through the perspective of, policy makers, rather than researchers. It explored how African policy makers, researchers and development practitioners can apply interventions to promote the use of evidence to improve development outcomes and practice. The case study research was guided by a common analytical framework (Figure 1) that combines two different frameworks: i) the Science of Using Science's framework that looks at evidence interventions and outcomes from a behaviour change perspective (Langer et al., 2016) and the Context Matters framework that serves as a tool to better understand contextual factors affecting the use of evidence (Weyrauch et al., 2016). The framework takes into account contextual influencers and the demand from policy makers. It breaks the evidence journey into the ways in which evidence is generated (evaluations, research etc), the interventions taken in order to ensure evidence use (such as training), the changes in capability, motivation or opportunities to use evidence which arise, and how these eventually translate into evidence being used. We take a nuanced view of use, to include instrumental, conceptual, process and symbolic use.

The detailed research is documented in the book, 'Using evidence for policy and practice – Lessons from Africa' (Goldman & Pabari, 2020) and in the videos and policy briefs that accompany each chapter. These are available on the CLEAR AA webpage: Supporting evidence use in policy and practice .

The cases

The research involved eight case studies, from five countries[1] plus the ECOWAS region[2] (see Box 1). The cases come from a wide range of sectors including agriculture, education, health, wildlife, and sanitation. They explore a range of different evidence sources such as evaluation, research, and research synthesis, as well as public participation and citizen engagement.

In each of the cases, we looked at the evidence journey, learning from the policy process and how this was accompanied by evidence interventions, and the eventual changes (or not) in policy or practice informed by the evidence that resulted.

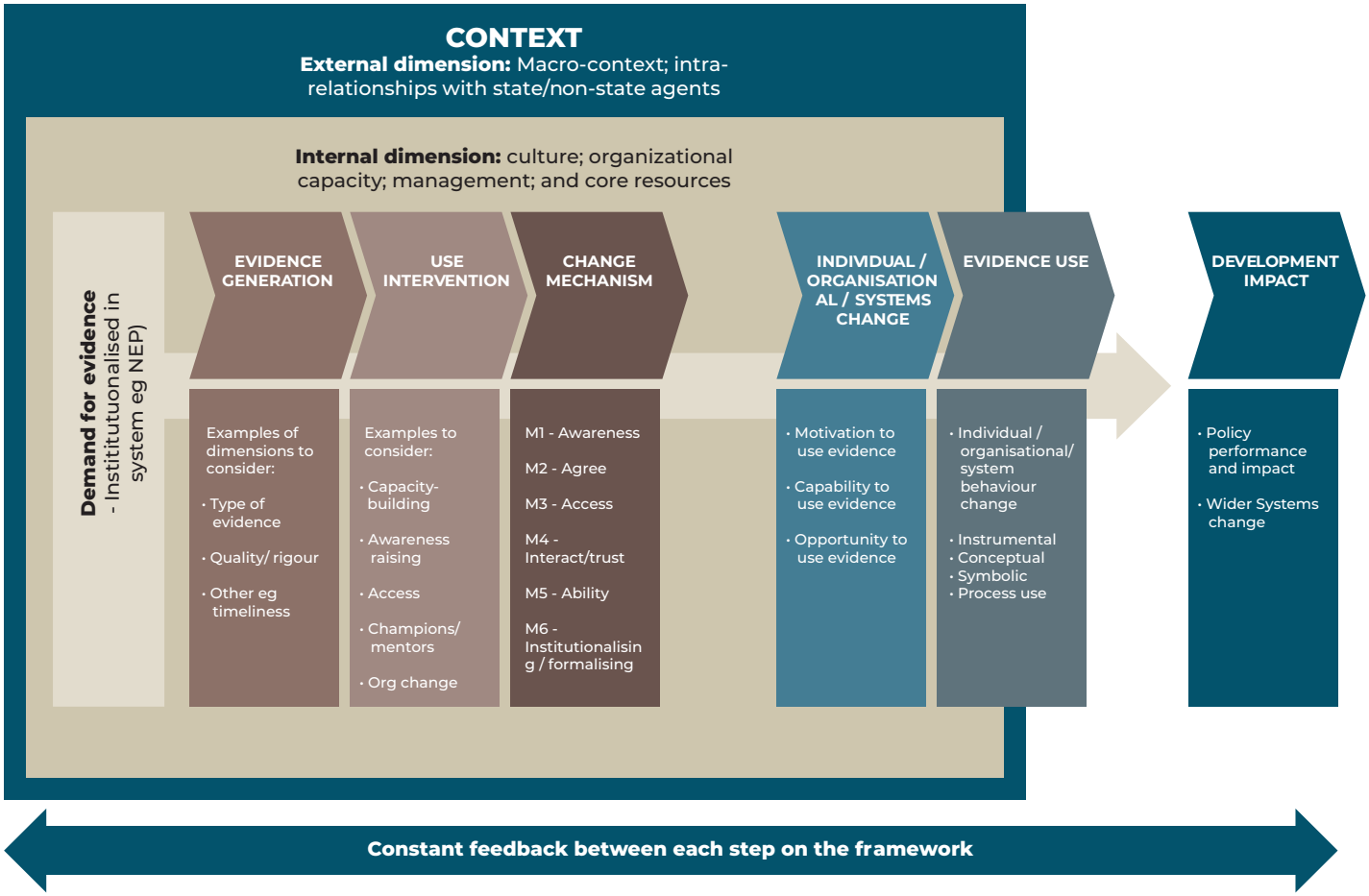
1 Benin, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda and South Africa

2 Economic Community of West African States

Box 1: List of cases

- Using evaluations to inform policy and practice in a government department: The case of the Department of Basic Education in South Africa
- Use of evidence in a complex social programme: an evaluation of the state's response to violence against women and children in South Africa
- The influence of local ownership and politics on the use of evaluations in policy making: The case of the public procurement evaluation in Uganda
- Rapidly responding to policy queries with evidence: Learning from Rapid Response Services in Uganda
- The challenges and potential of evaluations to positively inform reforms: working with producers in the Benin Agriculture Sector
- Parliament and public participation in Kenya: The case of the Wildlife Conservation and Management Act 2013
- The contribution of civil society-generated evidence to the improvement of sanitation services in Ghana
- Using evidence for tobacco control in West Africa

Figure 1 Analytical framework (Langer et al., 2020)



Findings

THE WAYS IN WHICH EVIDENCE SUPPORTED POLICY AND PRACTICE

All of the cases involved some form of **instrumental use**, where the evidence informed specific action. In four of the cases, evidence influenced policy change and in seven out of eight cases, evidence was used to inform changes in procedures and processes. A change in budget allocation was rarer, seen in only two of the cases. The cases also led to unintended uses, which included conceptual, process and symbolic use.

Conceptual use occurred in cases where the evidence informed understanding around a particular issue. For example, in the tobacco case, the processes in the evidence journey strengthened stakeholder understanding of the complex issues around tobacco control which enabled them to engage in the debates from a more informed position. **Process use** happens when changes occur as a result of the involvement of individuals in the evidence journey, not as a result of the evidence itself. In the education case, for example, convening theory of change workshops at the onset of an evaluation were an element in the South Africa National Evaluation System. This workshop helped stakeholders build a common understanding of the logic underpinning the education programme and strengthened the interest of stakeholders in engaging in the evaluation process. **Symbolic use** involves the use of evidence to legitimise pre-existing views (negative symbolic use), or to raise the profile of a particular intervention (positive symbolic use). We saw instances of positive symbolic use in the agriculture and procurement cases, where the evaluation processes and outcomes demonstrated the value of use of evaluations in the review of policies, regulations and guidelines.

CHANGES IN CAPABILITY, MOTIVATION AND OPPORTUNITY

The lens we used was a behaviour change lens, building on the work of Susan Michie. Michie's work suggests that it is changes in capability, motivation and opportunity which trigger behaviour change (Michie et al., 2011). We looked for these changes in the cases. In the rapid response case study, the service incorporates training of decision makers to sensitise them to the value of evidence-informed decision making, and strengthening their capabilities to articulate their evidence needs. In the sanitation case, publicly presenting comparative findings across all strengthened motivation to use evidence to improve service delivery. In countries where a national evaluation system was relatively well established, such as South Africa and Uganda, the institutional framework provided important opportunities to promote use. For example, in South Africa, it is required that the results of an evaluation are turned into an improvement plan, and it is also required that national evaluations are taken to Cabinet for approval. These formal mechanisms ensure that evaluations findings and recommendations are taken forward.

Box 2: Rebuilding trust between stakeholders – An example of unintended use

In three of the cases, (on wildlife, violence against women and agriculture), the policy stakeholders were very diverse and polarised from the onset. The spaces for dialogue and debate created during the evidence journeys enabled stakeholders to gain a better understanding of each other's perspectives and realities, rebuilding relationships and trust between them.

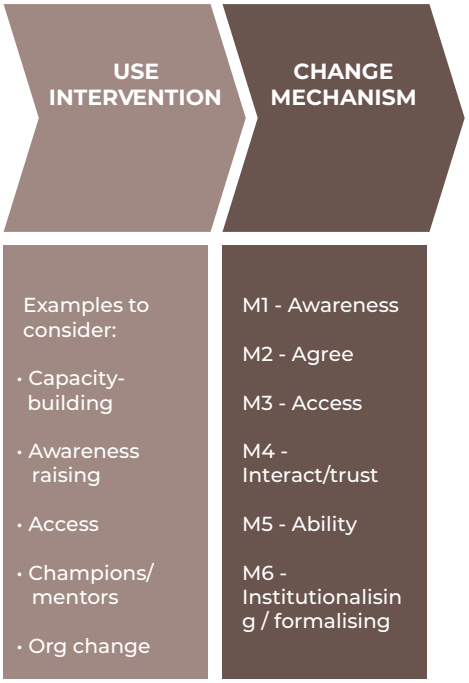
HOW INTERVENTIONS WERE USED TO ENABLE EVIDENCE USE

Our framework looks at the evidence use interventions that were applied across the different stages of the evidence journey, triggering different mechanisms that were important in building capability, opportunity or motivation to use evidence (Figure 2). In all cases, we saw the importance of facilitating the evidence journey, often in a knowledge-brokering role. Processes were deliberately facilitated to build agreement, ownership, commitment and trust. This was enabled through:

- Deliberately *convening forums* and *platforms* to enable dialogue and debate between the different stakeholder groups, in a manner that ensured their commitment and ownership. In some cases, these were institutionalised structures like evaluation steering committees.

- Creating spaces for *jointly planning, managing the evidence journey* and making sense of the evidence, including convening regular meetings and ensuring regular interaction and contact with decision makers.
- Creating *safe* and *trusted spaces* for meaningful dialogue across government and non-government stakeholders, including facilitating negotiation and consensus building, managing conflict and power dynamics and allowing for difficult conversations around beliefs and value systems.
- *Problem solving* at different stages of the journey, whether on technical or relationship issues.
- *Quality assuring* the evidence being generated.
- *Facilitating responding to the evidence*, e.g. in developing improvement plans.
- *Packaging and communicating* the evidence simply and effectively and at appropriate points (ensuring relevance, providing practical and realistic solutions, and using readable and accessible formats). This included *formal and informal interactions, trainings, meetings* and so forth at different stages of the journey, including with ministers, senior managers, parliamentarians, etc.

Figure 2 Interventions enabling evidence use



The role of systems which embed evidence use was also clear, with the national evaluation systems in Benin, Uganda and South Africa having a number of components that encouraged evidence use, such as evaluation steering committees and improvement plans.

Key lessons

Lessons around promoting evidence use included the following:

- **The usefulness of an analytical framework:** the analytical framework was very helpful in understanding how evidence use happened, and so in thinking through how to be purposeful about this going forward.
- **Context matters:** Across all the case studies, the context within which the evidence journey took place had a significant bearing on how evidence was used (see Table 1 for examples). Therefore, it is extremely important to understand the external and internal context prior to embarking on an evidence journey and to facilitate the journey based on that context.
- **The demand for evidence needs to be cultivated:** In the case studies we saw this taking place through institutionalising/formalising the need for evidence, training and advocacy of senior policy makers on the value and importance of evidence and in situations where civil society worked with government to establish mechanisms to enable use which, in turn, stimulated demand.
- **Credibility, quality and legitimacy are critical at all stages in the evidence journey:** In the cases, we saw multiple ways in which the trust in the process and in the evidence was carefully safeguarded and managed. For example, contracting consultants through a transparent procurement process to maintain the independence of an evaluation; ensuring that the cultural and racial composition of the team was appropriate so as not to compromise their legitimacy and even providing the evidence to trusted and respected individuals to deliver to stakeholders.
- **Relationships matter a lot:** Much more is possible when the relationship between supplier (e.g. evaluator), knowledge broker (e.g. Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) or research unit) and policy maker is trusting. Building these relationships helps build confidence and enables greater responsiveness.
- **The many ways in which evidence use takes place are important:** While often the focus is on the use of evidence in changing policy or practice in some way, other uses of evidence (described earlier) are equally important. These can, and often should, be deliberately enabled through the evidence journeys.

Table 1: Examples of contextual influencers of evidence use

Category	Dimension of context	Contextual influencers in the cases	Examples from case studies
External	Macro-context	Perceived significance of the policy challenge/question	Commitments made to international or regional agreements
			High levels of financial investment
			Legal requirement for legislative review
		Broader political and socio-cultural environment	Timing, for example, proximity to election period
			Space for public participation and civil society engagement
			Level of interest and engagement of stakeholders
		Catalysts of change	Crises
	Intra and inter institutional linkages		Pressure from development partners
			Pressure from civil society
Internal	Culture Organisational capacity Management & processes Other resources	Institutional environment	Leadership
			Evidence champions
			Systems and processes
			Mandates and positioning
			Reputation
			Ability to access and utilise evidence for decision making
			Culture for learning and accountability
			Organisational linkages and relationships

Policy implications and recommendations

Evidence use is complex. It begins long before an evidence journey and needs to be planned for and woven into the individual and institutional culture. It is a worthwhile investment.

The cases in this research demonstrate that it is possible to use evidence to get improved policies and practice in ways important to achieve longer-term societal and developmental impacts. In complex realities, evidence contributes to balancing out the influence of partisan interests, ensuring that decisions are supported or challenged by independent analysis, and that there can be more transparency on policy choices.

However, as pointed out by Langer et al. (2016), a passive provision of evidence is unlikely to be effective. Key factors in successful use of evidence include understanding context, involving stakeholders continuously, and ensuring demand for, and appropriate supply of, evidence.

Just as many countries have encouraged the supply of evaluation and research evidence to inform policy, we have to become much more purposive of the process itself and build system capacity to use a variety of interventions to promote evidence use. Interventions and change mechanisms need to be deliberately and carefully used, capabilities and motivation built, establishing buy-in at higher levels and exploiting opportunities within the policy process This will require building evidence systems which encourage use, building technical capacity to analyse and use evidence, and developing the capacity to facilitate and undertake knowledge brokering, both within and outside government.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This brief draws on case study research carried out for the project, 'Evidence in practice: documenting and sharing lessons from evidence-informed policy making and implementation in Africa', supported by the Hewlett Foundation.

The case study research was guided by an analytical framework that combines two different frameworks: i) the Science of Using Science's framework that looks at evidence interventions and outcomes from a behaviour change perspective (Langer et al., 2016) and the Context Matters framework that serves as a tool to better understand contextual factors affecting the use of evidence (Weyrauch et al., 2016). The framework approaches evidence use from the perspective of policy makers (i.e. from a demand rather than supply perspective). The framework takes into account contextual influencers and breaks down an evidence journey into the ways in which evidence is generated, the interventions made in order to ensure evidence use, the change mechanisms that arise as a result and the relationships between the evidence journey and the immediate and wider outcomes that emerge.

Findings emerging from the research are also shared through videos and a published book: *'Using Evidence for Policy and Practice – Lessons from Africa',* Goldman, I and Pabari, M (eds), with 39 contributing authors.

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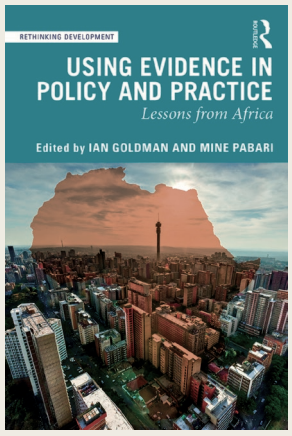

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